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ABSTRACT

Responses to a writing therapy questionnaire by 25 psychologists indicated how and why they used writing in their work. Three-fifths of the psychologists used writing frequently, two-fifths infrequently. Most of the counselors reported that clients reacted quite positively to requests that they engage in writing. The most commonly used forms of writing included lists (of problems, alternative solutions, and goals) and expressive/associative exercises, such as autobiographies and journals. None mentioned using poetry or other creative writing projects. The clients' writing seemed a key tool for the psychologists who reinforced it by discussing it with clients. The undeniable record-making aspect of writing also was viewed as quite critical in the therapy process. The most basic value of clients' writing seemed to be that it extended the therapy situation beyond regular meeting times. Writing was also considered important as a rehearsal for subsequent verbal expression of problems in the therapy situation. These responses have implications for the composition teacher, because psychologists' use of writing in the therapy situation provides a model for conferencing between writing teacher and student writer. (RL)

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PSYCHOTHERAPY: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMPOSITION

Joanne F. Petrick

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The title of my paper is "Psychotherapy: Implications for Composition." Translated, this means: do psychotherapists use writing in working with their clients? If they do, how and why do they use it? And what implications might their use of writing have for the composition teacher?

This topic--and these questions--have intrigued me for some time. My teaching and research in composition have been based on the assumption that what psychologists study and know about the self is most valuable for those of us who work with the self as writer. Psychological studies on motivation, cognition, and creativity have given me a better insight into teaching composition students than any other single resource, and I believe the same studies have paid off in terms of effective writing for my students.

In the process of these studies in psychology, I became very curious about if and how practicing psychologists use our subject area--i.e. writing. In other words, does the self acting as writer aid in the discovery and articulation of the self, the whole person? Are there, then, other correspondences between self and self as writer that can be explored? correspondences which might shed additional light on the individual's writing process?

A computer search on writing therapy in Psychological Abstracts and Education Resources Information Clearinghouse was not especially fruitful except for a 1979 article published by Alice Glarden Brand in the Journal of Humanistic Psychology which offers a historical survey of the expressive arts in psychotherapy. However, when I mentioned the use of writing in therapy to a couple of psychologist friends, they became very eloquent about their own experiences with clients. Their endorsement confirmed for me the validity of pursuing the topic.

I designed the Writing Therapy Questionnaire you see on the overhead and sent it to about forty psychologists who are friends or colleagues of friends, etc. Twenty-five returned the questionnaire--their specialties range from career counseling to chemical depression to problem relationships; they have been in practice anywhere

from two to thirty years and their practice focuses primarily on adults.

Let me share the findings of this questionnaire with you. Three-fifths of the psychologists use writing frequently; two-fifths, infrequently. The frequency usually "varies according to each person." The response of clients, when asked to write, is quite positive; only one of the twenty-five counselors report a high percentage of negative responses from clients.

The most commonly used forms include lists (of problems, alternative solutions, goals) and expressive/associative exercises such as autobiographies and journals. A good number of therapists also encourage their clients to write letters to themselves and significant others in their environments (most of which are not mailed). None mention poetry or other creative writing projects.

Question 6 states: "Your clients' responses to your request that they engage in writing (whether positive, neutral, or negative) may be elaborated in terms of various factors. Please indicate all of the responses you might get from various clients." This statement is followed by a list of eight possible responses.

The most frequently checked item is "I learn a lot about things in my life when I write them out on paper." The second highest response is "I'm afraid for someone else to read what I might write." Other frequently checked items include "Writing about myself (personal feelings, etc.) makes me feel foolish" and "I always enjoyed writing in the past." Under "other," a few therapists indicate their clients' doubts about the specific benefits of writing in the counseling situation.

Two-fifths of the therapists indicate that their clients reported that they "always enjoyed writing in the past." In fact, only one-eighth reported clients' anxiety about "knowing how to write."

Generally, the responses to question 6 suggest some interesting possibilities. The high frequency of clients who apparently enjoy writing and see it as a useful tool to develop self-knowledge surprises me; it makes me wonder if the persons who engage in therapy are essentially more comfortable or proficient with the process of verbalization.

Question 6 also suggests another problem about the subject matter that needs articulation. Many clients are apparently anxious about disclosing themselves (their feelings, etc.) in writing. Why, then, do they agree to write? According to question 10 on this questionnaire, their agreement equally depends on "their trust in you as counselor" and "their needs for understanding their feelings, problems, etc." Twenty therapists respond to these two factors; ten therapists also indicate "their clients' enjoyment of written self-expression." Clients in a counseling situation certainly would have a strong motivation for writing--their need for self-understanding which is probably intense enough to make them seek counseling in the first place. But whatever fears they might have about self-disclosure in writing are also mitigated by their trust in their counselors.

It seems reasonable to presume that this trust results from the helper-personality of the therapist and the way that he/she explains the writing assignment and its probable benefits for the client. In the case of the two-fifths who indicate that their clients enjoyed writing, again, this offers interesting speculations about the comfort and proficiency with words of those persons who engage in counseling.

Questions 7-9 ask if the therapists read their clients' writing, if they respond to it in writing and/or verbally, and what are the purposes of their responses. My reason for including these questions was to ascertain the frequency and nature of the feedback the therapists offer their clients. Fifteen of the respondents indicate that they "frequently" read their clients' writing; nine read it "infrequently." About half "never" make written comments, another half "frequently" does. Four-fifths "frequently" discuss the writing with their clients; one-fifth "infrequently" discusses it.

The clients' writing is, therefore, a key tool for the psychologists who reinforce its usefulness by at least discussing it with their counselees. Those who completed the questionnaire explain that they feel it is important for them to offer some feedback as a reciprocal gesture for asking their clients to write; they see this feedback as another way of "increasing the amount of contact I have with the client" or "to set up another kind of dialogue" with their clients. One counseling

psychologist in California has discovered that "written materials sometimes raise issues not raised in the regular sessions...which need to be clarified" and he can seek this clarification and elaboration in subsequent sessions. Many other psychologists report that, after reading their clients' writing, they could point out and discuss critical aspects or even patterns of their behavior and feelings to clients who were not as fully aware of these problems as they had been when they had only verbalized such problems to their therapists. The undeniable record making aspect of writing is thus viewed as most critical in the therapy process.

The last question on this form asks the counselor to discuss the general value of writing in the process of therapy. Let me say, first of all, that I was quite surprised with the specificity and extensiveness of this response; not a few counselors wrote on for a page or two; all of what they said is illuminating. Let me synthesize their answers.

The most basic value is psychologists' perception that writing extends the therapy situation beyond the one-hour, once-a-week time block. A counseling psychologist comments: "For me, writing is simply another mode of communication in therapy. It breaks the sometimes stereotyped process of two people sitting across one another and 'talking'. It also allows the client to specifically carry the therapy process outside of the office and into his/her life." Another therapist in Columbus, Ohio, notes that writing can serve the purpose of encouraging client independence. "In other words, a client can use journal writing...to rely on himself/herself versus storing it all up to lay out for the counselor...it encourages active involvement on the part of the client in the therapy process."

Writing gives the counselor tangible evidence of the clients' emotions, thinking patterns, and the structure of problems that must be dealt with in the process of therapy. Over the long run, the writing becomes a record of growth measurement as the client can reflect on the improvements he/she has made in therapy. Several counselors also note that they, too, use these records to point out and reward improvement in behavior.

Following the Aristotelian theory about the poetic experience and destructive passions, these psychologists also speak of the emotional aspect or value of writing therapy which provokes catharsis of troublesome feelings. The basis for this seems to be that writing is an activity which demands the expenditure of energy. It works against repression. Speaking of journal writing, one counselor says it "allows a client to 'cathart' on paper and sort things out--thus it can relieve excessive worrying and aid in self-understanding of feelings." Another person maintains "Once... [clients'] thoughts are on paper and out of their head they no longer have to worry about them--they can refer to [their] writing if they need to go back any further."

Moreover, the written catharsis is also seen as important in freeing the individual for subsequent verbal expression of his problems in the therapy situation or in dealing with a significant other; it is a rehearsal. And so this catharsis helps develop communication skills with others in a way that is safe and non-threatening to both sender and receiver of a message.

Many respondents also describe a cognitive component of writing therapy which manifests itself subsequent to the emotional catharsis. The writing helps them clarify and order or organize their thinking, feelings, goals, behaviors. Moreover, by writing, a client comes to understand his thinking process and how his thinking might affect his behavior. The common assumption here seems to be that writing forces thinking which reinforces writing--and so on. A counseling psychologist in Maryland puts it this way: "Time devoted to writing involves thinking, introspecting, analyzing, feelings, contrasting, etc. All of which are critical aspects of therapy. Writing encourages thoughtful appraisal of data: e.g., feelings, people, antecedents/consequences of behavior, etc.--thus, facilitating insight, awareness. And writing frequently leads to clarity, specificity of thinking which sets [the] groundwork for constructive problem-solving, decision-making."

And another counselor concurs that the "most valuable aspect of writing is to help the client achieve a sense of order --to help them get a handle on the various happenings in their lives. Through writing, many clients can arrive at an under-

standing of what is going on in their lives and what their alternatives are."

The act of writing at least symbolically actualizes the feelings and thoughts which, eventually, assists clients in coping with these thoughts and fears and appropriately modifying behavior.

As this questionnaire thus indicates, psychologists are quite enthusiastic about the value of writing therapy: as a recorded extension of the therapy process, as a cathartic outlet for emotions, and as a stimulus for analyzing and resolving behavior problems.

It now remains to ask what implications the findings on this questionnaire have for the composition teacher.

I think the success of writing in the therapy situation has a lot to do with the close, continuous rapport between the counselor and his/her client. The client works on the writing assignment which is subsequently hashed over in a face-to-face session with the counselor who responds to what has been written. And then the client may go off to "re-write" --this process continues, presumably, until the client achieves holistic health. Another aspect of the process is that the client is allowed the opportunity to cathart--to get rid of emotions which may obstruct his cognitive processes without any penalty--and so he can move eventually to objective, clear evaluations of his behavior.

This entire process, it seems to me, offers a good model for composition teachers who are interested in conferencing. It validates the benefits of one-on-one discussion: establishing a non-threatening, non-gatekeeper rapport with students, allowing re-writes of rough drafts, recognizing and not penalizing a possible writing syndrome which requires emotional catharsis before objective thinking. Parenthetically, I want to say that I do not think we should (or could given the numbers of comp students we serve) abandon the class for the conference. However, that conferencing is a successful alternative method is an acknowledged fact, and I think that data acquired through this questionnaire explains, in some part, the reasons for its success.

The therapists' frame of reference in offering feedback--verbal or written--to clients is relevant here, too. If you will remember, they describe the feedback as increasing the amount of contact with their clients/ setting up another kind of dialogue with clients. Their purpose in offering such feedback is to reinsure the success of the therapy. I think that we could likewise better develop the methods of such feedback--certainly in a conference it is necessary to demonstrate that we have read the student's paper and that we care about the student's writing efforts, if not the student him or herself.

Similar feedback is also possible when writing comments on a student's paper. The most challenging and rewarding graduate professor I had always seemed to write more on my paper than I had originally typed. No paper was ever returned with just a grade on it. His negative comments were never "put downs" but gently worded admonitions. The majority of his criticisms, however, were encouraging remarks about the study. Often they included his point of view on the subject, and, just as often, they were provocative questions concerning a relevant issue. Needless to say, I felt as though I were engaged in a real dialogue with a real scholar, and, believe me, I worked harder--thought harder for him than for any other teacher I ever had. If our aim as composition teachers is the academic health of our students, I think such a dialogue would go a long way to promote it.

I'd also like to address the connections between subject matter and motivation and the value of expressive/reflexive writing as represented by the clients' journals. The subject matter in the counseling situation is, of course, restricted to one--the personality of the client. But as the data on this questionnaire indicates, the variables or "sub-topics" are somewhat complicated--emotional catharsis is often a necessary precursor to thinking about behavior, goals, etc., which may be followed by decision-making. In spite of these complications and in spite of clients' expressed fears about appearing foolish when writing about themselves, they do--they do because of a high motivation for self-knowledge. Moreover, the form of their

writing--journals, autobiographies--most suitably expresses, as composition researchers Britton and Emig have found, the language closest to thought itself. In Britton's words, expressive writing "may be at any state the kind of writing best adapted to exploration and discovery. It is the language that externalizes our first stages in tackling a problem or coming to grips with an experience."

These facts remind me of the composition class plan which begins with a free writing or a journal writing on the topic of justice, for example, moves on to a personal experience theme on justice, and culminates in a formal theme on Machiavelli's concept of justice as elaborated in The Prince. This theme syllabus works because it moves from the personal, the known, the intrinsically interesting topic to an academic unknown which is re-shaped into something personally manageable and relevant in appropriately sequenced writing forms. The student is encouraged to think and to maintain his individual integrity while building an academic identity: the unknown is measured to fit the existing known.

I am sure that the data from this questionnaire--as well as the whole area of writing therapy--needs much more study and discussion. Perhaps we'll have some time at the end of this session to talk about it further. If not, let me close by recalling for you a human interest story that appeared in Time magazine about a year ago. The article featured a composition teacher in California who, billing herself as a writing therapist, counseled various individuals in the academic and business worlds about problems with their writing endeavors, like writer's block. The lady earned \$50 an hour for her services. As I said, writing therapy is a fruitful area for research! and practice! Thank you.

WRITING THERAPY QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. The information gained from it will be used in a seminar during the national conference on College Composition and Communication in March, 1981, in Dallas, Texas. The specific topic of the seminar will be the uses to which composition teachers can put psychology--i.e., how information about the total person can be implemented to make him/her an effective writer/communicator.

--Joanne F. Petrick, Ph.D.

Name (optional) _____

How long have you been in practice? _____

What is your specialty? _____

* * *

1. In the counseling process, do you ask, recommend clients to do any writing?
_____ never _____ infrequently _____ frequently
2. If so, what kinds of writing?
_____ lists (of problems, alternative solutions, goals, etc.)
_____ diaries or journals of feelings, events, etc.
_____ autobiographical essays
_____ other (explain) _____
3. What is (are) your purpose(s) in requesting clients to write? Please check all that applies.
_____ clients' general self-awareness
_____ clients' clearer expression of their feelings
_____ clients' clearer expression of specific problems
_____ clients' clearer expression of goals
_____ clients' clearer articulation of alternatives of action
_____ clients' self-enhancement, self-appreciation
_____ clients' better understanding of interactions with other(s)
_____ other (explain) _____
4. With each client, what is the frequency with which he/she writes?
_____ occasional, only for specific purpose
_____ daily
_____ weekly
_____ varies according to each person
5. When you ask your clients to write, what is their response? Please rate in terms of percentages. For example: 35% of clients respond positively, etc.
_____ positive
_____ neutral
_____ negative
6. Your clients' responses to your request that they engage in writing (whether positive, neutral, or negative) may be elaborated in terms of various factors. Please indicate all of the responses you might get from various clients.

- ☐ I don't know how to write.
☐ Writing was always my worst subject in school.
☐ I can write about things related to my job, but I can't write about myself.
☐ Writing about myself (personal feelings, etc.) makes me feel foolish.
☐ I'm afraid for someone else to read what I might write.
☐ I always enjoyed writing in the past.
☐ Writing was my best subject in school.
☐ Writing makes me feel good about myself.
☐ I learn a lot about things in my life when I write them out on paper.
☐ other (explain) _____

7. Do you read your clients' writing? _____ never _____ infrequently _____ frequently

8. If you read it, do you make written comments on what the client has written?
_____ never _____ infrequently _____ frequently
For what purpose? _____

9. If you read it, do you discuss it with the client?
_____ never _____ infrequently _____ frequently
For what purpose? _____

10. In your opinion, your clients' agreement to write during their therapy depends on _____. Please check all factors that might apply.
☐ their confidence in their writing abilities
☐ their enjoyment of written self-expression
☐ their needs for understanding their feelings, problems, etc.
☐ their trust in you as counselor
☐ other (explain) _____

11. In your opinion, what is the value of writing in the process of therapy? Please make your comments as specific as possible.

